

## Defining Our Transitional Bilingual Program



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Bilingual education is meant to build a bridge that helps students become proficient in their native language and English. Many children do not make it over that bridge. Often, it is not discovered until they are in the second or third grade that the student does not have a proficiency in either language.

When a third grade teacher finds students who are still classified as non-Spanish speakers and limited English speakers, then something very wrong has happened, especially if the students have been enrolled in the district since pre-kindergarten.

When teachers discover that children cannot read in either English or Spanish, they find it extremely difficult to bring the students up to grade level. Most often these students are language-minority students, or English language learners.

Many students who are entering pre-kindergarten are simultaneous bilingual and/or circumstantial bilinguals. *Simultaneous bilinguals* are students who acquired two languages simultaneously as a first language. *Circumstantial bilinguals* are students whose parents' immigration forced them to acquire their second language (Valdez and Figueroa, 1996).

Most students who are simultaneous bilinguals speak both languages for the most part. However, they may not be proficient in either language.

## Setting Principles

What can we do for these students? First, and most importantly, educators must revisit the school's bilingual models and identify guiding principles for instruction. Through research, the Intercultural Development Research Association has identified some important principles, such as the following.

- English language learners are held to the same high expectations of learning established for all students.
- Students in the bilingual education program are not exited before the third grade but are exited only upon demonstrating full English proficiency and begin on grade level in all content areas.
- Students participating in bilingual education programs since kindergarten are fully proficient in speaking English and their native language (on level) by the fifth grade; secondary-level students fully proficient in their native language in English as a second language (ESL) programs are fully proficient in speaking English after three years in the program. (These are not to be considered an exit criteria.)
- Students participating in bilingual education programs since kindergarten are fully proficient in reading and writing English and in their native language (on level) by the fifth grade; secondary level students fully proficient in their native language in ESL program are fully proficient in reading and writing English after three years in the program. (This is not to be considered an exit criteria.)
- Limited English proficient (LEP) students' performance in content areas (language arts, mathematics, science, social studies) meet and exceed the state and/or district standards (Robledo Montecel, et al., 2002).

Texas and other states require that schools provide transitional bilingual education to elementary school students who have been assessed as being limited in their English skills (Solís, 2001). These schools have principles that guide the instruction for their bilingual students.

## Identifying English Language Learners

But many students enter school as fluent speakers of English because it is the home language for most of the time even though Spanish is also spoken in the home.

The home language survey may indicate that Spanish is the home language, which it is, but still the child has not reached proficiency. The child is then placed in the bilingual classroom, and the teacher begins the instruction in the native language. The students are often lost. Their teacher becomes frustrated because he or she does not know what language to use for instruction. This is why setting principles to guide the instruction is so important.

Identifying our English language learners has to be done with care so that they are placed in the appropriate program with the appropriate teacher. Bilingual teachers need to be supported and should receive the proper training in order to service their students with quality instruction.

Students of diverse backgrounds are often placed in low-ability groups where instruction is based on a limited, watered-down version of the curriculum (Vacca and Vacca, 2002). It is important to remember that not all students are the same and that one set of guiding principles will not suffice for all.

## Planning Instruction

When the language proficiency assessment committee (LPAC) identifies children as beginner, intermediate or advanced, bilingual teachers often have students who are at different levels of proficiency. All too often, the instruction is not differentiated to meet their needs.

Teachers will need to plan instruction and decide on how to group students accordingly so that every student will succeed. In the planning, a teacher must consider the language distribution by grade level and by subject area.

Since bilingual education has different models, teachers should know what model their school district is following and be able to explain the model to visitors. Many school districts will say they are following a particular model, while the teachers will say they are following another.

Also, the model will change for each grade. For example many pre-kindergarten teachers will say they are doing a 90/10 model (90 percent of instruction in native language and 10 percent in English), the kindergarten teachers will say they are also doing 90/10, the first grade teacher is doing 80/20, and the second grade teacher is doing 70/30 at the beginning of the school year. At the end of the school year, the students are expected to transition to an all-English classroom. Is this reasonable? Perhaps some English language learners will transition smoothly, but many will not make the transition.

These are the students who are falling through the cracks. It is crucial that we find these students early on and place them in an appropriate program that is not watered-down, but rigorous in nature and that the students receive strong native language support.

However, the trends moving away from “tracking” students by ability and moving toward inclusive classrooms along with the increasing number of students whose first language is not English demand instruction that is strategic, with high learning expectations for all students (Vacca and Vacca, 2002).

What state and local mandated measures are used for guiding the instruction? Looking at the state and local mandated measures and at the information these provide about our students will assist in instructional decision making and differentiating instruction for the students.

Describing the grade level benchmarks and identifying the language in which performance levels will be measured will ensure that each student is properly placed in the best educational setting. Teachers need to be extremely familiar with the state standards and need be able to identify which of these standards transfers from one language to another.

If students learn in the primary language to recognize a main idea, find supportive details, order sequence of events, identify major characters, determine the existence of bias, or analyze emotional tone, then these thinking skills are abilities that do not ever have to be learned again (Thonis, 1982). The familiarity with the state standards and knowing what standards transfer allows the teacher to plan for instruction that will allow the students to be successful.

School districts and teachers have to be prepared to articulate to the parents the effectiveness of a bilingual program in their schools. Parents sometimes deny their children quality bilingual education because the school has not provided parents with the relevant research and descriptive information. School districts and teachers need to articulate to parents the effectiveness of their bilingual education program in their schools.

## **Crossing the Bridge**

Careful identification and assessment by the school leads to an appropriate placement in the best instructional program for each child. Proper staff development training and an educationally sound program with well established guiding principles also assists in achieving success for all students. Bilingual programs also must be evaluated periodically for their effectiveness.

Language-minority children must be allowed to cross the bridge that helps them be proficient in their native language and in English while also making a smooth transition into English instruction.

## **Resources**

Robledo Montecel, M. “[Bilingual Education is About Bridging and Building](#),” *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, November-December 1996).

Robledo Montecel, M., and J.D. Cortez, A. Cortez, A. Villarreal. *Good Schools and Classrooms for Children Learning English - A Guide* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, April 2002).

Solís, A. "Boosting Our Understanding of Bilingual Education: A Refresher on Philosophy and Models," *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, April 2001).

Thonis, E.W. "Reading for Minority Students," *Schooling and Language Minority Students: A Theoretical Framework* (Sacramento, Calif.: California State Department of Education, 1982).

Vacca, R.T., and J.A. Vacca. *Content Area Reading Literacy and Learning Across the Curriculum* (Seventh Edition) (Boston, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, 2002).

Valdés, G., and R.A. Figueroa. *Bilingualism and Testing A Special Case of Bias* (Connecticut: ABLEX Publishing, 1996).

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